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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal dynamics play a very important role when two people get together to discuss one's problems. The relationship which is established is influenced just as much by the intrapsychic workings of the counselor as by those of the student. The latter comes for help; the former tries to provide it. This is a laudable ambition, but also one which is laden with many potential pitfalls, such as feeling oracular or omniscient, or knowing all the answers. It is also easy to withdraw when working with resistant students. Much of this can apply to the classroom teacher who must deal with many sets of personality dynamics at one time. For this reason, one can think of the teacher as a "learning therapist". In an optimal situation, the learning therapist educates the child in a psychological environment that is most conducive to developing the maximum potentialities inherent in the child. Ultimately, the counselor or learning therapist must recognize his own limitations and shortcomings. If he remains alerted to his own dynamics in relationship tc those of the student, they will not impair his working with the student, but rather represent a potentially significant influence on what is achieved in the counseling or teaching situation. (KG)

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Interpersonal Dynamics in Counseling Students with Learning Problems

by

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In a previous paper (1) I discussed the various problems encountered by the clinical psychologist in his attempts to cope with the emotional conflicts of college students. At that time the emphasis was placed upon the innumerable intrapsychic problems that could interfere with learning such as fear of curiosity, fear of one's aggressive impulses, inadequate self-concept, etc. It was pointed out that the recognition of the emotional factors which interfere with learning does not obviate the necessity of developing and refining better methods of instruction. It

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simply takes cognizance of the fact that teachers are not omnipotent, and that some students can not learn in spite of excellent instruction.

The previous paper was primarily concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of those conflicts which interfere with either the acquisition or the utilization of skills. The focus of this paper will be upon the complex psychological structure that is inevitably established when one attempts to help a youngster who has "defaulted" from society. Although the orientation here is a clinical one, based primarily on a one-to-one relationship between the counselor and the student, I believe that many of the dynamics to be discussed are experienced (perhaps with less intensity) by the teacher in the classroom.

The Interpersonal Situation

Much has been written about what the child conceals from the counselor - and often from himself. But what the counselor conceals from the student is almost never mentioned. Yet it too is important. In any counseling situation, an intricate interpersonal relationship is established, with realistic and unrealistic aspects.

Not only does the child bring certain fears, assumptions, and prejudices to the situation, but the counselor, too, has certain anxieties, expectations, and hypotheses which inevitably must color his perception of the student and what the student reveals to him. In other words, this is an important and personal situation for both parties, the one who seeks help and the one who attempts to provide it.

Let us consider one example of how the needs and problems of the counselor (or in this specific case, the teacher) can strongly affect his relationships with certain students. A Negro teacher, born and raised in the ghetto, overcomes the tremendous social burdens of his early years and ultimately achieves his ambition to graduate from college and to teach in a secondary school. In order to have reached this position, this teacher has had to deal with prejudices directed against him, has had to work desperately to overcome a deficient language and experiential background, and probably has had to provide his own push and motivation from within. In other words, he has done it on his own! As he perceives it, with little

help from anybody, he has through his own guts and determination pulled himself out of the hell-hole in which he was born and has achieved some measure of dignity and self-respect.

One might suspect that this Negro would now have great compassion and sympathy for any student who is besieged by the same problems that earlier faced him. In many cases this is true. But man is a complex animal, defined by his historical and social position, by his personality make-up, by the gratifications he seeks, and by the specific behavior and personality of the people with whom he relates. This particular Negro teacher reacts quite differently from what many of us might anticipate. He is completely intolerant of the Negro student who is experiencing many of the problems that he, the teacher, once had to solve. He cringes when the student lapses into the "idiom," the remarkably rich and idiosyncratic language of the ghetto. He is not willing to allow these youngsters simply to learn a "new" language, one which would allow them to adapt to the conceptual structure of middle-class society. He insists rather that they substitute this

"language" for their own, that they deny their cultural heritage as he has denied it. It is almost as if he feels he is exposed and made vulnerable by the behavior of the ghetto student.

But it is much more than just the use of the Negro dialect that upsets this particular teacher. It is the manner in which his Negro students attempt to cope with the problem of being black in a white society. Perhaps they are too "aggressive," or perhaps they "demand" too much, or perhaps they just do not realize how important it is to learn and to achieve academically. After all, hasn't he made considerable sacrifices because of his recognition of the importance of fitting into the white man's society?

I believe that it is this attitude on the part of this teacher that accounts for his difficulty in understanding and relating to his black students. Beset by his own identity problems, he is in a quandary when he observes a wide variety of personal identity solutions. By discrediting other solutions, he is able to reassure himself either as to his "normality" or as to the acceptability of his solution. It is no wonder that

the student, sensing this, begins to perceive the teacher as an "Oreo" - black on the outside, but white on the inside. Thus, in this particular example, we see how undertainty about one's own self brings about an interpersonal relationship characterized by suspiciousness, hostility, and fear. Certainly these are not the qualities that will contribute to an environment in which there is receptivity to the learning process. Nevertheless, one must not forget that the same kind of uncertainty in another Negro teacher might lead to greater empathy and capacity to see and to understand a wide variety of solutions open to his own black students.

Interpersonal Roles

Let us now return to the clinical situation, where the student approaches the counselor asking for help with the baffling problem of continued failure to achieve. Filled with feelings of futility, the student is tempted to give up the struggle, regress to an overtly passive and helpless position, and demand that some real or fantasied strong figure in the environment "nurture" and save him. In other students, there is a despairing abandonment of the search for help, and

instead they resign themselves to a vague existence bordering on nothingness. Others settle into a pattern of achieving continuing "immediate" happiness by keeping almost uninterruptedly "turned on" with marijuana or other drugs. Still others show their opposition to what they feel is a tendency to turn people into cogs of dehumanized machines. They rationalize their learning problems by insisting they are fighting alienation and routine. Finally others have to fight their wish to regress to the passive dependent position in relation to the counselor. Instead they must deny their regressive impulses and drive away potentially helpful persons through arrogant or rebellious provocation and through discouraging inflexibility.

The counselor must remain vigilantly alert not only to the attitudes of the student with these problems, but also to his own attitudes in reaction to those of the student. If, for example, the counselor has strong dependent needs of his own, he may feel compelled to "win over" the student at any cost. Rationalizing his approach by his interest in "establish-

ing rapport," he might support the student's protests and allegations and indeed encourage them. Instead of helping the student to become aware of his defenses (defenses which often have led to and sustained the learning failure) the overly-dependent counselor may purposely steer clear of material which he recognizes is uncomfortable for the student. In this way the counselor stays on the student's good side. He remains loved by the student. He does nothing to help the student to solve his problems, but he can feel secure in his knowledge that he, the counselor, is considered well-liked.

Another counselor finds safety in the non-directive approach. He gives the student complete freedom to express his problems and to find solutions for them. He does not contaminate the situation by offering interpretations of the behavior and attitudes of the youngster. In this way the counselor believes that he makes no demands on the student and that, therefore, the child has the opportunity to solve his own problems independently and to develop maturity. But the demandingness of this freedom-in-a-vacuum is nowhere clearer

than in the burdens and anxieties imposed on children by "non-directive," noncontrolling, noncollaborating parents. The fact of the matter is that many students need direction and structure. Some students are able to obtain relief when an older authoritative person outlines a simple required schedule of living, defining what to do when, thereby providing a supporting structure which is not available from within himself. It is interesting that many of our college students today complain about too much restriction both at home and at school and yet, at the same time seem to be asking repeatedly for further and more substantial direction. (1) I think that Reik sums this up very well when he says: "Silence is not always golden. It is sometimes made of lead - for example, in conversations in which certain subjects are avoided. Only tact is golden: it prescribes when one should be silent and when one should speak." (2, p. 186)

At the other end of the continuum is the counselor who assumes the omnipotent "holier than thou" attitude. "I am the authority; you are the child; if you will simply do what I say, be what I am, everything will be all right." There are, of course, many variations to

this approach. In a sadistic context the counselor may act out his own family problems and transferences to his own father, siblings, etc. Unconsciously he may be directed to dominating and shaming the child who has come for help with his problems. In this way he ensures that the child (father, sibling) is made aware of his inferiority to the counselor.

Conclusion

There are, of course, many other attitudes that could affect the counselor in his approach to the student with psychogenically rooted learning problems. Various combinations and layerings of these are likely to be the rule among counselors and teachers, just as among any other group of human beings. It is likely that in one situation the counselor may emphasize one aspect of his personality; in another situation, a different quality may dominate.

I have attempted to point out that interpersonal dynamics play a very important role whenever two people get together to discuss one's problems. The relationship which is established is influenced just as much by the intrapsychic workings of the counselor

as by those of the student. The latter comes for help; the former tries to provide it. This is a laudable ambition, but also one which is laden with many potential pitfalls. It is all too easy to perceive oneself as oracular and omniscient -- as one who possesses all of the answers leading to mental health and academic success. On the other hand, it is all too tempting to cope with the burden of working with resistant students simply by withdrawing into an overly intellectualized and overly detached attitude. "I am only interested in theory or research."

As I have previously pointed out, much of what I have said here can apply to the classroom teacher who must deal with many sets of personality dynamics at one time. It is for this reason that I like to think of the teacher as a "learning therapist." In an optimal situation the learning therapist educates the child in a psychological environment that is most conducive to development of maximum potentialities inherent in the child.

Ultimately the counselor or learning therapist must recognize his own limitations and shortcomings.

If he remains alerted to his own dynamics in relationship to those of the student, they will not impair his working with the student. On the contrary, they represent a potentially significant influence on what is achieved in the counseling or teaching situation.

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